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Archives and Historians of Sport

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Archives and the documents within them have been at the heart of the practice of history and the occupational culture of historians. They have, traditionally, been the place where historians went to access and discover the past and to learn their craft. The volume of archival research undertaken has often been a measure through which historians judge the histories written by their peers. There has also, sometimes, been a sense that archival material is somehow less mediated than documents outside an archive and thus closer to its originators.¹ In a history of intercollegiate athletics and football, Ronald A. Smith even claimed that ‘The truth can often be found in archives’.² This has all led E. H. Carr to write of historians’ ‘fetishism of documents’, while Jordanova has more recently referred to the existence of a ‘Cult of the archive’.³ Unsurprisingly, archivists also share this reverence. An archivist at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne wrote in 1999: ‘Without archives, there is no history. Partial archives create partial history.’⁴

That is probably an exaggeration but, whatever their importance, archives are very varied in their nature. In the United Kingdom, they range from the National Archives (Kew, London), founded in 1838 and which holds over 11 million government and public records, to the county archives, which local authorities have a legal responsibility to operate, and the countless private archives of organizations and individuals, most of which are neither accessible to the public nor stored or organized according to general archival standards. There is also a wealth of archival documents in other repositories of the past such as museums and local libraries. Such traditional stores of knowledge are now, of course, being overshadowed by the vast repository of historical and contemporary texts and documents that

¹ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2nd edn, 2006), 161.

² Ronald Smith, ‘Intercollegiate Athletics/Football History at the Dawn of a New Century’, *Journal of Sport History* 29, no. 2 (2002), 229-39, 235.

³ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin [1961], 1987), 16. Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 161.

⁴ Christina Bianchi, ‘Sports History? Sports Archives!’, *Journal of Olympic History* 7, no. 1 (1999), 28-9.

is the internet. The online world is also collapsing the boundaries between archives, libraries and museums, as each seeks to reach out and make its written materials available remotely.⁵ The result of all this is that the notion of what constitutes an archive is changing and traditional archives are becoming morphed into a complex notion of heritage provision. But historians, especially those of more recent periods, are also becoming more imaginative in where they hunt for sources, as they explore the wealth of written ephemera to be found in car boot sales, second hand shops or simply lying around the house.⁶

Nonetheless, the availability and even location of traditional archives still has an instrumental effect on which topics historians choose to research. So, too, does their organization. Unless material is catalogued, the information within an archive is, for all practical purposes, lost. That matters because archives, or at least those that are funded by the state, are not intended as places where the records of the past are simply deposited and conserved. They are also places where that information can be accessed and even enjoyed. Archives need to be used if they are to have any relevance.

Historians of sport have not always been quite as reliant on traditional archives as those studying many other themes. Newspaper have instead been the staple source for those investigating modern sport, although sometimes these were accessed in archives. The centrality of the press to historians of sport is understandable given that local and national newspapers provide a rich vein of factual information and that most people's experience of sport was, at least partially, mediated. The press thus contributed to, rather than just reported, local perceptions and understandings of sporting culture.⁷ Yet, in 1999, Peter Beck complained that historians of sport had been too reliant on newspapers and were not always prepared to consult relevant archive material.⁸ Such concerns are perhaps a little dated now, especially as historians of sport make increasing use of non-written sources, but there is still, perhaps, not always a realization of the sheer variety of material that can exist, buried away in archives. As this paper will show, using or even finding that material is not always easy but

⁵ Paul F. Marty, 'An Introduction to Digital Convergence: Libraries, Archives, and Museums in the Information Age', *Archive Science* 8, no. 4 (2008), 247-50.

⁶ For a discussion of the practice of contemporary history see Martin Johnes, 'On Writing Contemporary History', *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* 6, no. 1 (2011), 20-31.

⁷ On the press as a source see Jeff Hill, 'Anecdotal Evidence: Sport, the Newspaper Press and History', in Murray Phillips (ed.), *Deconstructing Sport History: A Postmodern Analysis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 117-29.

⁸ Peter Beck, *Scoring for Britain: International Football and International Politics, 1900-1939* (London: Frank Cass, 1999).

hidden within and between the lines of local and national archives is a wealth of information that is of use to the historian of sport who is inquisitive enough to find it.

Archives and the history of sport

The most obvious archives for historians of sport to use are those devoted to the topic. These are few and far between and usually focussed on a specific sport or sporting organization rather than on sport in general. This does not mean they are small. The International Olympic Committee's historical archives in Lausanne comprise of more than 10,000 files covering the period 1894 to 1984, and many more for the years since because more documents are both being generated and kept.⁹ A 2005 review of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's library and archives noted that it employed two full-time librarians and housed 11,000 catalogued items.¹⁰ The MCC, once the governing body of cricket, began cataloguing its extensive cricket archive in 2012. It holds some 30,000 items dating back to 1826 and is committed to making them accessible.¹¹

Yet these are unusual examples. Most sporting organizations are very 'present-centred' so record keeping is poor or even non-existent, especially amongst smaller clubs. Moreover, professional sports organizations can be suspicious of outsiders and reluctant to grant access to researchers. Nor do they always value or understand what they do hold and many historians have heard tales of clubs throwing away records in tidy ups or to make space. Historians are not helped by the transient nature of some sporting organizations. While some clubs have histories dating back more than a century, there are many more with much shorter lifespans. When they come to the end of their lives, their records can end up being destroyed or stored away in someone's attic. Across the world, there are probably countless collections of what could be termed archival material whose existence is unknown to everyone but their holder. Local and national archives have not often pursued a policy of deliberately seeking such sporting collections to house. Financial, time and space constraints mean that archivists too have to choose what to keep and which collections to take on. The consensus amongst archivists is that only one to five percent 'of all institutional records

⁹ Cristina Bianchi, 'A Treasure Trove for Sports Historians: Historical Archives at the Olympics Studies Centre of the Olympic Museum, Lausanne', *Journal of Olympic History* 11 no. 2 (2003), 24-32.

¹⁰ Ellen L. Summers, 'The NCAA Library and Archives: A Gateway for Research and Scholarship in Intercollegiate Athletics', *North American Society For Sport History. Proceedings And Newsletter* (2005), 131-2.

¹¹ 'MCC Archive', <http://www.lords.org/history/mcc-museum-library-and-collections/mcc-archive/>

created will survive as archives'.¹² Where sporting material is deposited in an archive, it can be down to the requests of individual archivists or a club official with a sense of history, a wish to see his/her organization and own actions remembered, or even just a desire to free up some space in an office. Why material ends up in an archive can thus be significant to understanding both the material and its subject, but the story of the records as an object in themselves is too often not recorded. Even where archives do survive, they are very rarely complete collections of every document that once existed. Even the records of government, which might be expected to be far more extensive than of most of organizations, are extremely partial. Not everything is written down in the first place. There is often no record of the informal verbal meetings and telephone conversations that are key to decision making.¹³ Files, especially in an electronic age, are often trimmed, destroyed or deleted to save space, make things more manageable and, occasionally, to manipulate what can be later known. These issues of survival matter because they dictate how histories are written. Mason and Riedi's study of sport in the British military, for example, notes that one reason why it gives more attention to the army is simply because 'the records of its sporting organisations have better survived the vicissitudes of time' than those of the navy and air force.¹⁴

The archival concerns of the first generation or so of sports historians centred on how much sports material actually existed, how to find material located within other collections and the failure of sporting bodies to archive their own records.¹⁵ Further deposits by sporting organizations and the growth of electronic cataloguing have dampened some of those concerns. Indeed, one writer has recently estimated there are some 120,000 'sport-related archives' in England and Wales.¹⁶ This seems to refer to collections of documents and a 2005 survey of UK sports heritage identified 980 sport-specific archives in the public

¹² Terry Cook, 'We Are What We Keep; We Keep What We Are: Archival Appraisal Past, Present and Future', *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32, no. 2 (2011), 173-89, 174.

¹³ Rodney Lowe, 'Plumbing New Depths? Contemporary Historians and the Public Record Office', *Twentieth Century British History* 8, no. 2 (1997), 239-65.

¹⁴ Tony Mason and Eliza Riedi, *Sport and the Military: The British Armed Forces, 1880-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13-4.

¹⁵ Richard Fagan, 'Acquisition and Appraisal of Sports Archives', *ASSH Bulletin* 16 (1992), 36-47. Richard William Cox, 'Sports Archives, Libraries and Museums in the UK: What Should be the Policy?', *Sports Historian* 16 (1996), 109-12. Kenth Sjöblom, 'Taking Care of Sports Archives: Whose Responsibility?', *Canadian Journal of History of Sport* 24, no. 2 (1993), 91-3. Within the UK, Richard Cox was a pioneer in collating and recording bibliographies of archival material. See Richard Cox, *Index to Sporting Manuscripts in the UK* (Frodsham: British Society of Sports History, 1995).

¹⁶ Max Dunbar, 'The Everton Collection: Unlocking the Value of a National Football Archive', in Jeffrey Hill, Kevin Moore and Jason Wood (eds), *Sport, History, and Heritage* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), 107-23, 108.

domain.¹⁷ However many collections of documents there are, a whole series of historians have shown the potential of what can be done with the material that does exist in archives. Some of this work should be of no surprise. The Football League, for example, was so central to the organization of English professional football that it was inevitable that someone would use its records, even before they were deposited in Lancashire Record Office in 2008. Matthew Taylor's 2005 history of professional football in England from 1900 to 1939 could not have been written without the Football League's minutes and it shows the value of administrative records for understanding how sports were run, even though he was denied access to the full range of historical material then held by the league.¹⁸ Polley used the committee papers of the Amateur Athletics Association to study the battle between amateurism and professionalism through its decisions on advertising, sponsorship and the disciplining of those who broke the rules.¹⁹ Other archival collections have been far less obvious subjects for academic research, particularly when they focus on small localized clubs. Historians have sometimes shied away from local case studies, fearing perhaps they would appear parochial; the result has been, as Jeffrey Hill pointed out in 2002, that 'the life of the club is one of the untold stories of modern British social history'.²⁰ However, a series of studies based on club records do exist and demonstrate the potential of local studies for exploring themes, such as sociability, social exclusion and community identities, that should be central to sports history.²¹ Dixon and Garnham, for example, used club minute books to help analyse the working conditions of cricket professionals in Sunderland and Durham, teasing out findings of significance to the game far beyond its particular case studies.²² Richard Holt's work on the lived realities of class and gender in a London golf club is an example of how a single case study based on administrative records can say something of significance far beyond sport.²³ Historians have also found much to use in the archives of

¹⁷ Annie Hood, *Sports Heritage Network Mapping Survey: An Overview of Sports Heritage Collections* (Sports Heritage Network, 2006).

¹⁸ Matthew Taylor, *The Leaguers: The Making of Professional Football in England, 1900-39* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Martin Polley, "'The Amateur Rules': Amateurism and Professionalism in post-war British Athletics', in Adrian Smith and Dilwyn Porter (eds), *Amateurs and Professionals in Post-war British Sport* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 81-114.

²⁰ Jeffrey Hill, *Sport, Leisure and Culture in Twentieth Century Britain* (Palgrave, 2002), 144.

²¹ On the potential of material in local record offices see Mike Huggins, 'Approaches, Sources and Methods in the Local History of British Sport', *Local Historian* 43, no. 2 (2012), 96-106.

²² Pam Dixon and Neil Garnham, 'Cricket club professionals in Victorian and Edwardian County Durham', *Sport in History* 23, no. 2 (2003), 94-108.

²³ Richard Holt, 'Golf and the English Suburb: Class and Gender in a London Club, c.1890-c.1960', *Sports Historian*, 18, no. 1 (1998), 76-89.

non-sporting bodies. Employer records are an obvious source for those wishing to study work-based sport and recreational provision.²⁴ More creatively, Chaplin made profitable use of archival records from brewers and the licensed trade to study the growth and impact of darts, as well as the economic and business context in which it operated.²⁵

West Yorkshire Archive Service note that most of its records relating to sport were deposited ‘in the form of several items within personal or business papers’.²⁶ Yet material from individuals whose lives centred on sport are rare, partly perhaps because most individuals involved in sport do not think to deposit their material in archives, whether because of ignorance, modesty or secrecy. That does not mean there are no examples of personal papers from those who can be described as sportsmen and women. A flavour of such collections can be gained from the catalogue description for the six boxes of material at Glamorgan Archives relating to the rugby international, commentator and journalist Bleddyn Williams (1923-2009):

Albums, newscuttings, photographs and correspondence, 1937-2009; papers relating to school years, wartime Royal Air Force service and Operation Varsity, 1942-2006; records of tour to Australia and New Zealand, 1950; victory over the New Zealand All Blacks, 1953; papers relating to Rydal School 1937-1941; service with Cardiff RFC and Wales Rugby Union; work as a sports journalist including a sound commentary on the Cardiff v. New Zealand match 1953 on vinyl disc and tape; recordings on vinyl of traditional rugby songs; personal memorabilia including match programmes, invitation cards and year books 1925, 1938-2009; reminiscences 1945-1996; Cardiff RFC programmes 1935, 1945-1956 and other programmes 1937-1961 including victory of Wales and Cardiff RFC over New Zealand 1953; scrapbooks and photographs 1945-2009; miscellaneous correspondence 1950-2008; video tape relating to Wilfred Wooller 2001; miscellaneous club and national team badges, personal identity cards, rules, members' handbooks, admission cards and tickets, and related printed material and photographs 1950-2009.

²⁴ For example, Steven Crewe, ‘What about the Workers? Works-based Sport and Recreation in England c.1918–c.1970’, *Sport in History* 34, no. 4 (2014), 544-68.

²⁵ Patrick Chaplin, *Darts in England: A Social History* (Manchester University Press, 2009).

²⁶ Rachel Tapp, ‘West Yorkshire’s Sporting Heroes’, *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 33, no. 1 (2012), 75-87, 78.

This is an impressive assemblage but it not could be used to say much about Williams' private life. Consciously or otherwise, individuals can engage in managing their written legacies as much as any political organization. Dilwyn Porter studied a smaller but similar collection from football referee Percy Harper. It consisted of letters, press cuttings and other ephemera and Porter used it to investigate life for the often forgotten figure on whom professional sport depends. Prominent in the material was a scrapbook relating to the 1932 FA cup final, the highpoint of this referee's career, and Porter suggests that what has survived 'is what Harper chose to preserve. It represents what he deemed important and/or interesting'.²⁷ That collection was deposited in a local record office after the referee's death in 1954. Yet Porter's research was not published until 2015, illustrating how long material can go before being used. In fact, it might be suggested that this example is unusual because the material has been used by a historian at all.

Harper was also atypical because he was at the pinnacle of his sport. Most people's involvement in sport is far more informal and casual. Indeed, given how sport intersects with the lives of vast numbers of people at some point or another, it is inevitable that buried in the personal papers of thousands of people are traces of sporting events attended, exercises undertaken and matches seen on television. These might be anything from a mention in a diary, a receipt for equipment bought or a ticket stub or invitation. Of course, doing anything with much of this information is rather difficult. For example, what can we read into someone keeping a ticket stub from a match they attended beyond the fact that it mattered to them? But perhaps that is enough. Mass Observation is one source here that is yet to be properly utilized. Although ongoing research by Matthew Taylor is demonstrating its use for studying sport in the Second World War, he is reliant on the file reports where investigators describe and record their observations. However, the archive also contains a very large number of diaries and surveys where individuals recorded their own day to day activities and observations. These allow not just a study of sport but, more importantly, an understanding of how it fitted around the rest of people's lives and the reactions of family members to their sporting activities. Where else might we find out about incidents such as the 48-year-old housewife in Laindon (Essex) who was glad when her husband went out to a football match

²⁷ Dilwyn Porter, 'Whistling his way to Wembley: Percy Harper of Stourbridge, Cup Final Referee', *Sport in History* 35, no. 2 (2015), 217-40.

on Christmas morning 1937? He had not given her a present and she later ate her dinner in a different room to him. In this case, sport offered a respite from an unhappy marriage.²⁸

Part of the joy of using Mass Observation is the randomness of much of the material within it. In contrast, the records of the state are more systematic and predictable, despite their significant holes. The state's involvement in sport varies significantly between nations but in the UK many of the records generated by this are rooted in legal purposes that have nothing to do with sport. The biggest collections relate to sport's business organization.²⁹ Companies House in Cardiff, for example, holds samples of annual returns, director and shareholder lists and company accounts for limited liability companies still in existence, although the repository is not well set up for access to the older material. For those companies no longer in existence, the material, or at least a selection of it, has been deposited in the National Archives. As well as demonstrating how commercial early sport was, this material can be used to assemble occupational and geographical studies of who were running and investing in professional sport.³⁰ Yet state involvement in sport was far wider than this. Beck's study of the impact of international tensions on British football and Polley's of the early Olympics both make extensive use of Foreign Office files as they chart the way the government intervened to uphold national interests.³¹ Concerns over violence and safety also brought government interventions and investigations, generating records, some of which are still coming into the public domain.³²

Such examples only skim the surface of what the state generated in relation to sport. Some sporting organizations, such as sports councils, were and are part of the state and thus their records are amongst the millions in the National Archives.³³ The activities of the police, courts, transport authorities, employment regulators, and many other parts of the state all interact with sport at various times meaning the National Archives holds a huge variety of

²⁸ Mass Observation day survey 25 December 1937, respondent 38, cited in Martin Johnes, *Christmas and the British: A Modern History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

²⁹ See Matthew Taylor, 'Football Archives and the Historian', *Business Archives* 78 (1999), 1-12.

³⁰ For example, Wray Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game: Professional Sport in Britain, 1875-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³¹ Beck, *Scoring for Britain*. Martin Polley, 'No Business of Ours?': the Foreign Office and the Olympic games, 1896-1914', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 13, no. 2 (1996), 96-113.

³² Martin Johnes, 'Heads in the Sand': Football, Politics, and Crowd Disasters in Twentieth-Century Britain', in Paul Darby, Martin Johnes & Gavin Mellor (eds.), *Soccer and Disaster: International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2001), 10-27.

³³ Kevin Jefferys, 'The Thatcher governments and the British Sports Council, 1979-1990', *Sport in History* (2015). However, even the state faces problems in preserving record and Heggie has noted how her research was hindered by the apparent loss of Sports Council records of the early 1980s. Vanessa Heggie, *A History of British Sports Medicine* (Manchester University Press, 2011), 14

material relating to sport and leisure more generally, including material that offers a bottom up view rather than just the perspective of the elite.³⁴ The local state is no different. Local authorities provided leisure centres and parks in and on which to play and their relevant committees can provide evidence of the demand from different sports and attempts to regulate or promote certain behaviours.³⁵ But, in a less direct fashion, local authorities also interact with sport through their planning requirements, their community grant making, and their general desire to promote their civic identities. Again, the potential is significant even if much of the material is buried away and requires some searching for. Indeed, it is such detective work that is one of the joys of practising history for many people. Another is rediscovering events that are long forgotten. One such example was South Glamorgan County Council's consideration of an urban grand prix in Cardiff in the 1970s. The plans never came to anything but while the specific details are of little significance, they are more than just another archival curiosity. The event illustrates the imagination the local authority had in trying to boost its city's economic fortunes and is an example of the value of keeping records that relate to what did not happen as well as what did.

Digitization and democratization

Locating such obscure archival material is becoming easier as catalogues move from paper cards to computer databases. Yet the significance of that development has been overshadowed in most commentaries by consideration of the digitization of sources. This not only allows remote access to archival material and encourages the use of archives that sports historians might not have been previously thought of using; it also means that the potential of the material is being unlocked. One example of that is the digitization of the UK's decennial population census. Names, places and occupations can all be searched instantly, locating specific individuals from a crowd of tens of millions. Players and club officials identified within other sources have been traced, giving access to their recorded occupations, ages and family circumstances.³⁶ Similarly, keyword searches of digitized newspaper archives mean it is now possible to locate information instantly that previously would have required years of

³⁴ For an early discussion of this see Edward Higgs, 'Leisure and the state: the history of popular culture as reflected in the Public Records', *History Workshop*, 15 (1983), 141-50.

³⁵ For example, see Martin Johnes, *Soccer and Society: South Wales, 1900-39* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002) and Mike Huggins and J. K. Walton, *The Teesside Seaside Between the Wars: Redcar and its Neighbours 1919-1939* (Middlesbrough, NEEHI, 2003).

³⁶ For example see Martin Johnes and Ian Garland, 'The New Craze': Football and Society in North-East Wales, c.1870-90', *Welsh History Review* 22, no. 2 (2004), 278-304.

searching.³⁷ Recent research has been able to use this to shed significant light on the origins of football by uncovering previously unknown press articles.³⁸ A few archives are now entirely online, most notably the impressive Everton Collection, which comprises of 18,000 items, including match programmes, minute books, and financial records, all fully indexed and searchable, as well as objects such as medals and cups. It is probably the most comprehensive football archive in the UK, and perhaps beyond.³⁹ Yet the most significant possibilities of digitization are not what can come from locating specific sources but from taking a much bigger and more quantitative approach, from what a team of Harvard scientists have termed ‘culturomics’.⁴⁰ This is a development of social science’s content analysis and involves quantifying the occurrences of sources and words within them rather than analysing anything specific they say. Unlike traditional content analysis, it exploits the size and volume of online archives and can involve an analysis of literally millions of texts. Within sport history, the potential of this might be as simple as counting the number of times a sport is mentioned within a specific newspaper in order to plot and visualize its growth and diffusion. But it can also involve probing into the language of archives, tracking and tracing the evolution of sporting terminology, metaphors and ideas. The techniques and technology are still in their infancy but the potential impact could see a transformation of historical practice.⁴¹

Even where material is not digitized in a form that allows its text to be searched, the simple fact that it is online at all is a significant advance for those wishing to access it, because, despite the fact that not everyone has internet access, this helps overcome the barriers of geography and social capital that discourage some from visiting traditional archives. Digitization can even be thought of as representing something of a democratization of archives. Yet the digitization of sources is an expensive process to undertake and some

³⁷ Adrian Bingham, ‘The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians’, *Twentieth Century British History* 21, no. 2 (2010), 225-31.

³⁸ Peter Swain, ‘The Origins of Football Debate: The ‘Grander Design and the Involvement of the Lower Classes’, 1818–1840’, *Sport in History* 34, 4 (2014), 519-43.

³⁹ Dunbar, ‘The Everton Collection’.

⁴⁰ Jean-Baptiste Michel et al., ‘Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books’, *Science* 331, 6014 (14 January 2011), 176–82. <http://www.librarian.net/wp-content/uploads/science-googlelabs.pdf>,

⁴¹ For a full exploration of digital archives and culturomics in a sports history context see Martin Johnes and Bob Nicholson, ‘Sport History and Digital Archives in Practice’, in Gary Osmond and Murray G. Phillips (eds), *Sport History in the Digital Era* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 53-74. On culturomics and newspaper archives see Bob Nicholson, ‘Counting Culture; or, how to read Victorian Newspapers from a Distance’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17, no. 2, (2012), 238-24.

digitized archives are only available to individuals and libraries able to pay for subscriptions. Indeed, it is precisely to allow their commercial exploitation that such archives are digitized in the first place. This, of course, undermines any democratization of archives that digitization can engender. Not all commercial ventures are, however, completely hidden behind paywalls. Getty Images, for example, an immense archive of historic photographs, can be searched online and utilized by researchers for free, as long as he or she does not want to publish any of the material.

Some people are deliberately choosing their selection of sources or even their projects based on what is digitized. This is understandable, especially in a world of limited research funding, but there is also a danger that innovative or challenging research is discouraged. Those archives that are digitized tend to be those that speak to present day issues or centres of power and influence, while the archives of the marginalized might be in danger of not only not being digitized but also being unused. Leary has thus warned of an ‘offline penumbra’, an ‘increasingly remote and unvisited shadowland into which even quite important texts fall if they cannot yet be explored [or identified] by... electronic means’.⁴² The digitization of archives is thus not always the great step forward for historians it might first appear to be. Moreover, even using those sources that are digitized is problematic. Their material characteristics and wider context can be lost when they are simply read online rather than as part of a physical collection where it is impossible to head straight to the most relevant documents. The Optical Character Recognition technology that keyword searching utilizes is not as sophisticated or accurate as often imagined, with the result that important sources can be missed and quantitative analyses are never 100 per cent accurate.⁴³ Nor does digitization escape any of the old issues of interpretation and sometimes it can make them starker. For example, searching for the word ‘football’ in the 1881 census reveals there were fourteen people in England who listed their occupation as ‘football maker’. Without the ability to electronically search the census results, they would have been lost to the historian but their discovery might also be misleading. The fact that twelve of them were from London and the other two from Warwickshire suggests that this category may be down to local enumerators rather than a nationally recognized occupation. Indeed, there must have been many more people making footballs in the 1880s than just fourteen. Interpreting the typicality of sources

⁴² Patrick Leary, ‘Googling the Victorians’, *Journal of Victorian Culture* 10, no. 1 (2005), 72-86.

⁴³ Simon Tanner, Trevor Muñoz and Pich Hemy Ros, ‘Measuring Mass Text Digitization Quality and Usefulness: Lessons Learned from Assessing the OCR Accuracy of the British Library’s 19th Century Online Newspaper Archive’, *D-Lib Magazine* 15, 7/8 (2009). Online at <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/july09/munoz/07munoz.html>

is standard fare for the historian but this does not mean there is not a danger of placing too much emphasis on the obscure discoveries that digitization can throw up.

Digital sources will only grow and grow, not just because they allow archive services to raise user numbers (and thus justify their funding), but also because many written sources now only ever exist in electronic format. This latter issue throws up its own conundrums and there is a danger that many of the kind of communications that previously survived as paper letters will now simply disappear into the ether of deleted email and social media accounts. Digital developments certainly do not mean that traditional physical archives are redundant. It is difficult to imagine the funding ever existing for a digitization of everything in archives. Nor will traditional archives stand still. New private paper deposits continue to be made all the time and every year major new government papers come into the public domain. At least in a British context, it is perhaps unlikely however that any large new archive will come into existence but, on an international scale, it is worth remembering the sheer scale of material on the history of Eastern Europe that became public after the end of the Cold War. Similarly, Allen's research on cricket in South Africa took advantage of archives that became more accessible after the dissolution of apartheid.⁴⁴ In understanding that archives are not static, we might also remember that even collections under care can lose their funding or even be destroyed, a fate suffered by some of the papers of the Football Association of Wales administrator Alun Evans during a fire at the National Library of Wales in 2013.⁴⁵

The function of archives is also changing. Tightening funding circumstances and the diversification of ideas of heritage are leading archives to stress their own role within that abstract concept. Rather than being thought of places where documents are conserved, archives are increasingly discussed as repositories of local memory and places where the histories of local communities can be both accessed and challenged.⁴⁶ Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd have thus argued that archives are often 'building blocks upon which memory is

⁴⁴ Dean Allen, 'South African Sports History and the Archive', *African Research and Documentation* 116 (2011), 71-88, 75.

⁴⁵ 'An update on situation following the fire at the National Library of Wales': <https://www.llgc.org.uk/services/media-and-business/press-releases/an-update-on-situation-following-the-fire-at-the-national-library-of-wales/>

⁴⁶ Andrew Flinn, 'Archives and their Communities: Collecting Histories, Challenging Heritage', in Graham Dawson (ed.), *Memory and Histories: Critical Debates, New Trajectories*, Working Papers on Memory, Narrative and Histories (University of Brighton, 2012), 19-35.

constructed, framed, verified and ultimately accepted'.⁴⁷ It is a recognition of this community role that encouraged archives to overcome the traditional sense that sports heritage was less important than other topics, to look more seriously at collecting sports material and to publicize the materials they already held.⁴⁸ Indeed, sport has sometimes quite consciously been seen as a route to increasing visitor numbers and reaching parts of the community who would not normally think of visiting an archive.⁴⁹ The learning, outreach and exhibition programmes of the Everton collection are a testimony to how sport can be used to engage a wide range of people with the collections of archives. Yet, after the material was launched online, requests to see the originals in Liverpool Record Office tailed off to a handful, illustrating that archives' fears that digitization might undermine their physical presence are very justified.⁵⁰ In a climate of financial constraints, evolving technology and changing public expectations, archives face an uncertain future.

Archives in practice

The case of Eastern Europe is a reminder of the political nature of archives, something critics have been eager to remind historians of.⁵¹ The material within archives is created for the benefit and use of its producer and not for later retrieval by historians; it is thus shot through with the assumptions and interests of that body or individual, which is partially what makes it useful to historians. When material is released is also political, although in the UK the trend towards freedom of information is leading to the gradual introduction of state material being released after twenty rather than thirty years. Moreover, what gets chosen for preservation is selective and political. As one archivist has argued, 'we generally keep what we are, what we are most comfortable with, [and] what we know'.⁵² In a sports history context, it is Douglas Booth who has done the most to reflect on the significance of the partiality of archives. He argues that they should be acknowledged as metaphors for power, places where evidence,

⁴⁷ Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Shepherd, 'Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream', *Archive Science* 9, no. 1-2 (2009), 71-86, 76.

⁴⁸ On the sense that sports heritage is less important see Kevin Moore, 'Sports Heritage and the Re-imagined city: the National Football Museum, Preston', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 14, 4 (2008), 445-61, 459.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of an archive using sport to encourage wider use of its collections see Tapp, 'West Yorkshire's Sporting Heroes'.

⁵⁰ Dunbar, 'Everton collection', 121.

⁵¹ For a South African discussion of the political nature of archives see Carolyn Hamilton *et al* (eds), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002).

⁵² Cook, 'We Are What We Keep', 174-5.

wittingly or not, is distorted by the working of that power and a focus on the present rather than the past.⁵³

At the heart of Booth's argument is not a disregard for archives but a disregard for the scant attention that is sometimes given to how they are used. He rejects any idea that archives are somewhere where facts and the truth can be found, partly because of the partiality of archives and partly, influenced by ideas of postmodernism, because any concept of truth in history is problematic. In this light, archives cannot contain historical truths because such things do not exist. Yet Booth's criticisms of sports history are probably creating a dichotomy within practice that does not actually exist. The vast majority of traditional historians, or empiricists as they are often referred to because of their emphasis on empirical data, also acknowledge the simplicity and limitation of ideas such as facts and historical truths. They understand and work around the limitations of what does and what does not survive in archives. Their reliance on documents is not naive or fetishism.⁵⁴ As Marwick argues, what the historian is after is knowledge and knowledge comes from evidence, which, in the case of history, is the primary source. It is only, he maintains, 'through the primary sources, the relics and traces left by past societies, that we can have any knowledge of them. The discovery and analysis of primary sources alone does not make history; but without the study of primary sources there is no history.'⁵⁵ From this perspective, archives, whether physical or digital entities, retain their centrality in historical practice. It also means that the central concern for understanding the limitations of historical knowledge is not the archive itself but the historian and his or her means of researching and interpreting. After all, archival material does not become knowledge until it is actually used. As Steadman puts it, 'nothing happens to this stuff, in the Archive. It is indexed, and catalogued, and some of it is lost. But as stuff, it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativised.'⁵⁶

Yet actually using the material in archives is not always straightforward. Archival material was rarely written with the view that an outsider might later try to interpret it, perhaps hundreds of years later. It might contain straightforward details - such as statistical

⁵³ Booth, Douglas, 'Sites of Truth or Metaphors of Power? Refiguring the Archive', *Sport in History* 26, no. 1 (2006), 91-109. Douglas Booth, *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁵⁴ For a response to Booth's arguments see Martin Johnes, 'Archives, Truths and the Historian at Work: A Reply to Douglas Booth's 'Refiguring the Archive'', *Sport in History* 27, no. 1 (2007), 127-35.

⁵⁵ Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 153, 156.

⁵⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 68.

reports, lists of names and addresses, statements of opinion in letters and records of decisions in minutes - but there are many more fragments of information that need piecing together and holes and gaps that need filling. There is much that is simply difficult to understand.

Photographs, in particular, are often not dated or labelled. Cash books and financial ledgers can be complicated to interpret. Minutes are often records of decisions rather than the discussions that led to them. Letters might not be accompanied by the replies. Names and individuals are often not identified. Handwriting can sometimes be difficult or even impossible to read. But even such partial sources offer invaluable insights into the past, if they are used with some guile and imagination.

At the heart of successful archival research is the art of inferring and reading between the lines. Historians have to think about why sources say what they do, even if the resulting interpretations cannot be proved in any scientific fashion. For example, a 1935 note in the records of Nine Mile Point Welfare Association states that the seed mixture to be used in the construction of football and cricket pitches should be checked. This suggests both that pitch quality mattered and that the contractors were not fully trusted but there is nothing in that particular evidential record to prove that interpretation.⁵⁷ At other times, the evidence in archives is more concrete, even if it is not arranged in a way where its significance is obvious. One such example is the interwar billiards receipts book from Cwmpark Workmen's Institute. This is simply a list of bookings and receipts for the hire of billiards and snooker tables, arranged on a day-by-day basis. At first glance, it is of little significance but looking for patterns within the data reveals something of the demand for indoor leisure; in most years Saturday was the most popular night of the week for people to hire a snooker table and take up was generally higher in the winter than in the summer. The document also offer cases where this pattern did not always hold true but interpreting why requires speculation. There is nothing in the book to explain why, for example, in the week beginning 5 December 1932 there were thirty snooker bookings on the Monday but none on any other day that week, despite billiards bookings holding steady. Perhaps this was because the tables were out of action but there is no way to judge this from this document alone, although clues might be found in the minutes of the workmen's institute. At other times of more regular use through the week, the popularity of Saturday night snooker fades and the historian might need to look into working patterns and conditions at the local colliery for hints as to why. The partiality of the archive is also shown by the existence of a single timesheet for table 1 for Friday 29

⁵⁷ Nine Mile Point Welfare Association, invitations to tender for construction of football and cricket grounds, c. 1935. Richard Burton Archives: Swansea University, SWCC/MNA/I/26.

December 1933. It is loose within the receipt book and presumably such sheets once existed for every table and for every day. This one shows that the table was in constant use from 10.45 am to 9pm at night, with bookings lasting from 20 minutes to over an hour and a half but with most lasting around an hour. The uniqueness of this one document means it is impossible to know how typical it is but it also illustrates how documents might be misleading. Just because most bookings lasted around an hour does not mean the games did and there is the possibility that people sneaked in more than one or even played slowly to ensure they got value for money. Moreover, there is nothing to say whether a game meant just that or a series of frames and if room rules were ever written down they have now been lost.⁵⁸ As is so often the case with archival research, the evidence is tantalisingly suggestive but frustratingly limited and the historian is left to make educated guesses and to search for other sources of evidence and examples upon which to build an argument.

So much of the value of archival sources comes from their totality rather than any specific document within a collection. One example of this is the unusually detailed records of Severn Sisters RFC. Although the club was relatively small and not one of Wales' rugby elite, its accounts and minutes show the complexity of running a rugby club, and how committee business in this amateur sport was dominated by organizing travel, insurance and raising money to cover all the expenses. Apart from in a separate minute book for annual general meetings, little is said in the records about actual rugby but, as a whole, the documents give the sense of a club that was clearly run on a sound and responsible basis and which saw itself as part of a rugby community. It sent fruit and chocolate to an injured player from an opposing team, it financially supported its local junior team, held social evenings and organized tickets for Welsh international games. As always, understanding specific issues requires reading between the lines. For example, the minute book records that in 1956 the new colliery manager had 'expressed a desire to help the club'. The result of this was that he was invited to become a patron of the club. He accepted this role and stated that he was 'willing to cooperate to the fullest extent'. No more is said of this but the historian might assume this episode was both recognition of the status of colliery managers in coalmining communities and a way to avoid clashes between matches, training and shifts for players who worked under him.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Cwmpark Workmen's Institute billiards receipt book, 1928-36. Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University: SWCC/MNA/I/2.

⁵⁹ Severn Sisters RFC minutes of meetings, 12 and 19 June 1956, Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University: 1997/21, box 1, number 8.

In such cases, interpretation often requires using a variety of sources from a variety of places. Huggins and Gregson were able to write a regional history of regional athletics and cycling in the early twentieth century because of the existence of ‘an unusually comprehensive ... and admirably maintained’ archive at the Ashbrooke Cricket Ground in Sunderland. Yet they note they were only able to investigate ‘participation, class and attitudes to amateurism and the commercialisation of leisure’ through combining the sporting records with the press and census and using ‘a combination of prosopographical and nominal record linkage techniques’⁶⁰ Even where research is based on a single archive, the historian is still bringing to it their background of contextual knowledge, learnt both from secondary sources and, more generally, from wider research experiences. Tosh has even written of historians filling gaps in the historical record through a ‘feel’ or instinct for what might have happened gained from their depth of primary research.⁶¹ Indeed, it is this context and experience that has usually led them to the archive in the first place; no archive is ever used in a vacuum.

Good historians thus have to work carefully with their source material; they think about where a source came from, why it survives and why it was come across. They read between the lines, inferring, looking for both witting and unwitting testimony. They search for and question the assumptions made in a source and look at what it does not say as well as what it does. They examine the ways a source says things and consider its relationship to wider social, cultural and political contexts. It is through such techniques that historians tackle the limitations of the archive. It is neither a perfect means of working nor a route to absolute truths but it is all we have.

Historians’ use of archives has perhaps come under scrutiny because their thinking and method is usually not made explicit in written outputs. Unlike in science, the research process of most historians could never be replicated. Even books do not explain how the archives were found, selected and used. Was every possible source available consulted or just those footnoted? How long was spent reading the sources? Were they skimmed over in search of relevant information or was every word read and reread? Were all the notes taken double checked for accuracy? The precise mechanics of data gathering in history are hidden. Nor are there any agreed methods or standards for such issues and for the processes of

⁶⁰ Keith Gregson and Mike Huggins, ‘Ashbrooke Whit Sports, Sunderland and Its Records: A Case Study of Amateurism in Late Victorian and Edwardian Athletic and Cycling Competition’, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31, no. 9 (2014), 994-1011. Description of the archive from Lynn Pearson and Simon Inglis, *Played in Tyne and Wear*. (London: English Heritage, 2010), 90.

⁶¹ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History* (Longman, London, 3rd edn., 2002), 158-9.

working in an archive. Indeed, it might be said that there is no defined historical method at all beyond the application of thinking about sources critically. Yet, while ‘historical method may seem to amount to little more than the obvious lessons of common sense’, as Tosh has argued, ‘it is common sense applied very much more systematically and sceptically than is usually the case in everyday life’. Moreover, it is ‘supported by a secure grasp of historical context and, in many instances, a high degree of technical knowledge.’⁶²

Conclusion

The dynamics of archives in sport history are captured in the opening of Matthew McDowell’s history of Scottish football in the nineteenth century. Here, he discusses the 1879 minute book of Ardrossan Seafield Football Club, an organization he says is now long forgotten. By writing about it, he has changed that situation, rescuing the club from obscurity and transforming its records from the raw materials of history into actual history. Yet he was only able to do so because its minute book somehow ended up in the Vennel Local Family and History Centre in Irvine, and because he stumbled upon it there on an open shelf where it sat uncatalogued. It is the only club minute book listed in his bibliography and thus the accident of its survival and discovery, together with McDowell’s decision to use it, has elevated an otherwise obscure organization, one in a crowd of hundreds that existed at the time, to centre stage in the game’s Scottish history. But this also means it is impossible to know for sure how typical the material is. Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine that whoever wrote the minutes more than a century ago could imagine that a historian would one day note the significance of his recording a request for a constable to attend an upcoming match and the invitation of local gentlemen to that game. Yet that is what McDowell has done. Trivial details, such as the proposal of a one penny fine for members caught swearing or the fact that all opposition goal scorers were recorded as ‘strangers’, offer tantalising glimpses into the world of football in the 1870s.⁶³ Yet that is all they can be. Archival material is a window into the past but one where most of the view is obscured and where much of what is on view is difficult to understand or assess.

There is nothing remotely unique about the history of sport in any of this and it is an indication of the importance of considering sports history as a branch of history rather than a

⁶² Ibid., 105.

⁶³ Matthew McDowell, *A Cultural History of Association Football in Scotland, 1865-1902* (Lampeter: Edwin Meller, 2013), 1-2.

discipline in its own right. While the archive base for some fields, such as political history, can sometimes be more complete and more straightforward, historians of all topics face the problems of the partiality and politics of archives. They also encounter the changing nature of archives and the challenges and opportunities presented by digitization. Moreover, no historian, whatever their field, can turn their back on archives. Even those who study the kind of material culture that never exists in traditional archives still rely on contextual knowledge that is either directly or indirectly rooted in someone's archival research. Postmodern critics are thus right to note the role of archives in framing history. What gets deposited in them, whether through choice or accident, and how that material is then stored and catalogued shapes history. Archives do not determine the actual past but they do help determine what we know about that past. But it is only a case of helping. Until material is actually read and written about, it is not part of history. This means how archives are used is as important as what it is in them. This means that it is as important to understand historians as it is to understand archives.